# THE PHI BETA KAPPA IDEAL[1]

YOU are about to found a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa; and I am going to speak to you of the idea which is the soul of that Society. For Phi Beta Kappa is an idea, a thought. It is not of the earth—nor built of bricks and stones. Laboratories and halls are not needed by it; it does not subsist on revenues; even organizations with secretaries and presidents, are only external and unessential means. For it is spiritual, and dwells in the mind.

Phi Beta Kappa is a conception of life, and then a purpose to realize it. Let us try to reach a provisional understanding of it by observing the meaning of the name—Philosophy a guide of life. Philosophy here means consideration, rational consideration. It means the scrutiny of our experiences, and the testing of their values. But this scrutiny and rational consideration do not imply that reason and the intellect are all that is of worth in a human life. Rather, a broad, rational and human consideration will embrace all human interests and experience. For our intuitions, our impulses, our passionate desires, even our loves and hates, all make part of us as men and women. They have a right to be included in the full life of a human being. That rational consideration which is philosophy will properly admit them, and ponder on their worth and truth.

But a human being, many-sided as he seems through the changing action of his faculties, is or should be a unity and

[1]An address delivered by Henry Osborn Taylor, D.Litt., L.H.D., of New York City, at the installation of the Beta of Texas Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at the Rice Institute, March 2, 1929.

a whole. He should not be a whirling eddy of distracted motives and pointless acts. Rather let him be and continue as himself. And, if so, he must keep his experiences and his thought of them integrated as elements of a whole, and related to the individual that he is. And the standard which his rational consideration must apply to his experiences is their relationship to himself and their effect upon the well-being of the whole man or woman. This is a catholic criterion by which to judge the value or the truth of anything coming into our lives. Our philosophy must regard our entire natures, and in the light of the whole consider the worth of each element of experience. To this end it must needs strengthen our character, and steady our purpose and the will to achieve it.

Moreover, no man or woman can exist alone. Individual lives are bound up in the life of society. Consequently the standard of their own welfare, which tests the worth of their experiences, must relate as well to the welfare of human society.

Such seems to me the meaning of Phi Beta Kappa and the heart of our ideal. You see at once that this conception and the purpose to realize it are scarcely inborn or implanted by nature. It does not spring up in childhood, nor is unaided youth likely to find it. It may not come to us through living out our own uninstructed lives; it must be reached through education. That will bring to us ample and well-proved matter for our thought, and will instruct and discipline us, so that we may consider everything more justly, and set it all in larger balances. Education opens to us the ever unfolding vista of the beauties and values which mankind through all the ages have drawn from life.

Such an education will not fail to present to our minds standards of life and conduct that have been tested. These

will aid us to curb rash impulses and reconsider our own most cherished whims. They will bring us matter for thought, and help us to coördinate and use it. In the end, what life has taught us, and what books have taught us, should become part of ourselves and of our working faculties and personal power. This will also strengthen our character.

I am not a professor. My years have not been passed in academic circles. But I have been a learner all my life, and have always been trying to put my thoughts together. How to teach has always been to me a mystery. I am ignorant and unpracticed in the academic art. Yet I shall venture to wander with you for a little while, through our recognized provinces of education, to find illustrations of the significance which the Phi Beta Kappa ideal carries for me.

Surely, the education corresponding with our Phi Beta Kappa ideal depends not only on the subject, but on the way each subject is taught, studied, and thought upon. The bearing and relationship of each subject to kindred matters should be made to appear. Indeed, the student should be brought to realize the inherent kinship of all manner of endeavor after knowledge. He should also try to grasp the relationship of each study to his whole education and even to his scheme of life. It goes without saying that he must use his own mind actively and constructively.

One aim of education is to draw out and develop our faculties to their utmost power. Balance and a broad foundation are important, whatever may prove to be the student's ultimate calling. If one would develop one's faculties to the full, and complete one's nature, there should be at the foundation a broad appreciation of the human elements and the enlightening influences which have built up the lives of men and women.

Those elements have been brought together for us and set forth in veritable instances and examples of their action and effect. This is the office of the great works of literature and art. They are the teachers of us all. To be sure, you do not have to read books or look at pictures in order to learn something of life. You are part of it, and it surrounds and hammers its impacts and its lessons upon you from all sides. But this does not mean that it is well for you to be ignorant of those high exemplifications of it which are likely to rise above your own experience. They may disclose reaches of humanity which you have not perceived. They will show you its greatness and beauty and open its depths; they will present its sublime attainments and awful catastrophes. They will profitably perplex your mind with mankind's dilemmas. They will teach you infinitely more than one poor life can compass in its passage through the world. Seeing, through their vision, the laws of life, you will learn to look beyond what might have been your untaught impulse and to moderate those personal whims which an ignorant person is apt to regard as true fulfilments of his nature. You will view your hopes and fears, your own small fortunes, in the universal light shed by a broad knowledge of the consequences of human conduct.

It is no light thing to learn life's lessons from these great works, any more than it is easy to learn from life itself. Education is not an easy matter; and the upward path through life, while it may be a way of happiness, is also one of unremitting toil.

As examples of such great works, I might point to the epics, the dramas and lyrics, and the art of ancient Greece. Possibly they are more beautiful and perfect than any creations since their time. They present in high relief what humanity may be and attain to through itself. They lay

bare the mortal agonies of men netted in the web of fate, which is the web of their own conduct.

Modern life presses on without the Greek classics. There is no time to learn their beautiful and difficult speech. And how can we bring into our throbbing present those far-off instances of humanity, and see that it is the same as ours? Let us not waste blame upon this state of fact. Fine pictures and statues may still be seen, and the symphonies of Beethoven may be heard. There are great plays and poetry and fiction in our own tongue. These may be made our companions—the great works themselves, I say, not books about them. Read Shakespeare, Milton, if you will, and other splendid ones. Books about them will not make them yours.

We need these great works to complete our knowledge of what we are or may be. They give us the high features of humanity, which we are not likely to become familiar with in our daily intercourse. And they teach us the principles which control or affect the lives of all men and women. The tragedy of Macbeth shows how things come to pass; how the wicked deed breeds evil in the doer, and brings ill to all within its range of consequences. As you read the play, passage by passage, you follow the inevitable consequences of the murder of the king. Although we are no murderers of King Duncan, such great literature may enable us to see our actions set in the laws of life. In our universities today a very serious study of man and human prospects is proceeding by methods of psychology, introspective, psychoanalytic, behaviouristic, or using the pregnant concept of the Gestalt. These schools are all modern, full of energy, and doing valiant battle with each other. None of them is to be depreciated. Yet some of us are thinking of purpose and the mind's intellectual endeavors, which seem our especially human

activities. Laboratory psychology has so far done little to enlighten us concerning these.

From the works of imaginative literature one passes to history by an easy transition. That also deals with life. It is not a dead, but a living record, setting forth the advances and retrogressions of mankind. It is the story of human endeavor. At least the endeavor is the most surely human part. The endeavor is the man himself. What he accomplishes or fails to do may not depend upon him.

I beg you who study history to study it with active sympathies. Bring to yourselves what the people you read about were trying to do; what they cared for; what they desired. We are judged most justly by such as understand our motives. And so one will best understand the past by looking into the motives of those who seem to have led it on, or to have held it back. We bring their conduct home to ourselves, and try to view it as if it were our own.

But we also seek in history the laws or principles of events. We cannot confine ourselves to the motive and endeavor of the actors. We must consider what they accomplished, and where and why they failed. For we seek to learn how things come to pass. And we may have noted that many a road to hell is paved with good intentions. The lesson of history is that not only must you do what seems right and best to you; but that at your peril you must choose aright, in accord with what may be the best possible outcome in the prevailing order of things.

Do we not then need all the instruction that history can bring us? We may think that the course of things does not quite repeat itself. Yet we must recognize that the courses of past events carry wisdom for us. Did I say *past* events? Is any event quite past? Rather, do not events, great and small together, carry on in their results and consequences?

The past is in our present, dynamic still; even as we of the present are building ceaselessly the future, while we are doing what we can to fashion our own lives.

Our interest in history follows what we care most for in the past—that which joins with what we desire for the present, and hope for in the future. Each present shapes its own view of history, and rewrites the record according to its own desires and understanding. We care more for social and industrial affairs than for dynasties and wars. We look at politics from an economic standpoint. We take and should take from history what we care for, and can use and make into our own lives.

Here I would offer a suggestion. We want what we can use and we want the best. The epochs of the past have differed one from another. Nations and periods present elements of strength and weakness. Each great people, or notable period, has much to interest us, something to teach us. But not all of it is equally worth our notice. We should study the chief accomplishment of each people or period. By so doing we shall gain most that can be taken to ourselves.

Man is and always has been a motley animal and an aspiring soul. Rottenness and ordure strew the past. Every people, every period has its weak points, its foul parts. Their lesson is chiefly negative. We can gain more by occupying ourselves with the great and strong things of the past, than with its foolishness. Strength, rather than folly, best carries on into the making of the world.

Let me illustrate from the salient points of various peoples. We may look afar to China, and draw lessons from its old Confucian system of government and social adjustment. It can tell us of the saving strength which is held in reverence for family ties and for the graded relationships

of society. We learn what conserving power may lie in customs and ceremonies.

India has quite another lesson. She reveals the need of some men to sink themselves in the calm of that which is conceived as changeless and undisturbed. Opposed to this, Greece, the universal, offers all manner of enlightenment touching the brave attempts of mortals to win whatever is of worth in human life. They strive for fame; they love all forms of beauty; they seek truth, knowledge of many kinds. Further to the west, Rome proves her steadfast bravery; presents her self-control and her evolving methods of government; and then her admirable and cosmopolitan jurisprudence, which underlies so much of our own civil law. Passing on through the Middle Ages, we observe the constructive energies of religion, scale the heights of mysticism, and learn to feel the emotion of religious love.

The Renaissance displays the glories of religious art becoming magnificently human. We sense the reborn life of cities, and discern a strong awakening of the desire to try out the world of nature directly and through experiment. Science sturdily bestirs itself, and moves on mightily, through the centuries of Vesalius and Copernicus, of Galileo and Newton. To the north, Germany has asserted its nationality in the reform of religion and through revolt from alien ecclesiastical dominance. Among the histories of modern peoples, probably that of England can most readily be taken to ourselves; and then the story of our own expanding country. These are somewhat breathless suggestions; you will extend them for yourselves.

A knowledge of history will be found broadening and enlightening for those who enter upon the study of the law, and wish to avail themselves fully of its intellectual discipline. Nothing is better than the law to strengthen the reasoning faculties; and the lawyer's training and respect

for precedents need not keep him from a humane and benevolent view of human affairs.

The student of history, as well as the student of literature, who would advance far, will need a knowledge of languages other than his own. That goes without saying. But, in studying languages, we must still bear in mind that our Phi Beta Kappa ideal demands that all our studies shall make for the strengthening of our faculties and the broadening of our lives. A wise and penetrating study of language is admirably adapted to open for us the ways of the human mind. It reveals the mind's spiritual energies using the images of sense—the images rising from our contacts with the physical world.

Thus far we have been busy with the humanities; that is to say, the clearly human side of education, the humane study of man, his conduct and his works. Other studies have to do directly with the world of organisms and things inorganic, in which we live. These also come within the range of our education, since no way of seeking knowledge is alien to our ideal. Only we have to think how the study of natural science may be humanized in us and made to enlarge our human selves.

I am not a scientist, and have no practical suggestions for those who are students of physics, chemistry or geology, or the biological sciences. One and all, these are entrancing fields of research and experiment. Today the old conventional barriers and divisions no longer hold between them. Physics and chemistry are but different aspects of the study of the elements and foundations of our world. Geology uses them both, and aids them in return. It is itself half biological in its investigation of the succession of once living organisms. All departments of biology need chemistry, and struggle to become exact and mathematical. They would look to the methods of physics for a pattern. But physics

has recently revolutionized itself, and is passing through a region of uncanny happenings, unrealizable to any except perhaps the mathematical physicist himself. The rest of us stand without, listening to the echoes, but assured that the search itself is of the highest intellectual value.

From our standpoint of Phi Beta Kappa, I think I may venture to say that the pursuit of any branch of science is of intellectual and human value to the man who can lift his mind to the bearing and relations of his subject. There is mental discipline in scientific work. It trains us in clear seeing, and in discriminating statement. Our scientific knowledge should instruct and enter into the principles by which we live. It will thus affect our conduct and our attitude toward every social question. I need not comment on the universal utility of science for the times in which we live.

It may be that the scientific method is essentially the same for all the sciences, however much the surface aspects vary. Always there must be some idea or working hypothesis, which suggests the line of investigation to the investigator. He uses his tools of direct investigation and carefully controlled experiment, and of mathematical calculation. He will adjust and systematize the result, but must accept what for him is the fact as he obtains it. He will reason on the fact; but, while the fact stands, it must control. Perhaps the ultimate rationale of it all is not for him. He is working in the middle distances of fact.

There is still a way of seeking truth which is not quite the same as that of science. Its emphasis is different and its scope. Science professes to confine itself to what it can see and measure, test by experiment or mathematically deduce. But philosophy, to which I now refer as the final factor in our Phi Beta Kappa education—philosophy does not recognize any such limit to its search. It is the expression of man's desire to think things out to their ultimate conclu-

sions or despairs. Its method is rational consideration. It scrutinizes the fields of knowledge, as well as the form and substance of human experience. In its effort to certify and finally rationalize experience, philosophy may direct itself to any prevailing topic of curiosity or intellectual interest. It has, in the past, applied itself to religion, and has made religions into theologies. Today it reaches to all sides of life, and above all is absorbed with the data of science. It is seeking to test the methods and results of physical, and indeed of social, science through processes of ultimate rational consideration. Herein the imperative logic of the mind obeys its own necessities, and sets its own standards of consistency and truth.

Philosophy is for those who are moved by these insistences. I present to you its intellectual motive and answering rational effort as a proper part of your own nature, and as a final stage in your education. It will help you to appraise and harmonize the other educated portions of yourself. Philosophic consideration includes the principles of conduct and of happiness. Through these it pays due regard to all the factors of human life; it establishes the character in the fitting choice of what is best; it should enable the man or woman to think and do what is right and what seems best or most expedient through life's storms as well as under happy stars. It will help you to maintain yourself an integrated whole, a self-controlled man or woman.

Such education as I have tried to outline is merely begun in college; nor is it concluded in the opening years of professional work. It is an education to continue all your life.

I have not spoken of religion, because my topic has been disciplined and integrated knowledge. But religion also moves and breathes in my own conception of a full and rounded life.

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